

Orleans Ball Room
717 Orleans Street
New Orleans
Orleans Parish
Louisiana

HABS No. LA-1155

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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

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Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20240

Historic American Building Survey

The Orleans Ball Room

HABS No. IA-1155

Location: 717 Orleans Street, New Orleans, Orleans Parish, Louisiana.

The Orleans Ball Room is located in Square 59, Lot 6 of the Vieux Carré in the City of New Orleans, Orleans Parish, Louisiana. The street address is 717 Orleans Street, the "downtown" side of the street. This street was originally planned by Engineer de Pauger to be the Grand'rue of the Vieux Carré and is therefore seven feet wider than other streets in what is now called the French Quarter.

The Ball Room is presently owned by the Society of the Holy Family, a religious order of Nuns, and is only one portion of a convent group in this square. It is occupied and used by the Nuns as a school for Negro girls.

The significance of the Ball Room derives principally from its former historical uses related, as it was to several different phases of life in the early history of New Orleans. Today it has become the center of a controversy between commercial interests who wish to convert the property to a motel and those who are attempting to maintain historic architectural values in the Old Quarter.

Part 1. Historical Information

Construction on the original Orleans Ball Room was begun in 1816 by Henry S. Latrobe who also designed the Orleans Theatre adjacent to it. It seems that work had hardly begun before the fire of September of that year destroyed the Ball Room, the Theatre and a large adjacent area. Two months later, however, both the French and the English editions of the Louisiana Courier, on November 13, 1816, carried an advertisement by John Davis for a "Prospectus for Rebuilding the Orleans Theatre".

The contract for rebuilding was passed before the Notary Public, Michel de Armas, on February 17, 1817 (Notarial Archives, City of New Orleans) between John Davis, owner of the Orleans Theatre and William and Robert Brand. (See Appendix A)* No notice of the completion, or of the grand opening has been discovered, however, the Louisiana Courier, December 5, 1817, carried an advertisement announcing the "First Concert in the Orleans Ball Room for December 9". (See appendix B)

Since, unfortunately, neither Latrobe's nor Brand's drawings have been discovered, we must rely upon the descriptions and early views furnished by contemporary writers. In these writings both the Ball Room and the Theatre are described jointly and, apparently, interchangeably.

One of the earliest descriptions describing the festive character of the building is to be found in J.H. Ingraham's (pseudonym, "A Yankee") The Southwest (Harper & Brothers, N.Y., 1835. Pages 116-

* The appendices, which are transcriptions of primary materials, are included in the field records.

119). (See Appendix C) The fact that the two buildings were interconnected appears in a description of the Ball Room under the heading of "The Orleans Theatre" in Gibson's Guide and Directory of the State of Louisiana and the Cities of New Orleans and Lafayette, (John Gibson, Publisher, New Orleans, La. 1938, p.314) (See Appendix D) An illustration in the same book, page 315, (See Appendix E) shows us what must have been the original appearance of the two contiguous buildings, the Ball Room being the one on the right. The Theatre Building shown on the left was destroyed by fire in 1866, but the Ball Room was spared from this blaze. Essentially, the facade today is the same as depicted in the illustration. Major exterior change has been the addition of the wood balcony and louvered screen which obscures the classic lines of the building. The balustrade-parapet has also been changed.

Between the date of its beginning in 1817 and the present, the Ball Room has served a variety of functions in the affairs of New Orleans. During its earliest years it was the location of brilliant society balls, including a grand ball for the Marquis de Lafayette. It has also been linked with the famous Quadroon Balls of early New Orleans by many writers including the Federal Writers Project of the W.P.A., New Orleans City Guide, revised by Robert Tallant (Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 1952, p. 130). This impression is contradicted in Stanley Clisby Arthur's Old New Orleans, A History of the Vieux Carré, Its Ancient and Historical Buildings (Harmanson, Publisher, 1936, revised 1962, p. 76).

Arthur states, "Davis' Rooms continued to be popular with the best elements of New Orleans society until 1830 when the Saint Louis Hotel was completed and its magnificent ballroom thrown open"

At one time, in 1828, it was the Seat of the State Legislature when the Government House was destroyed by fire (New Orleans City Guide, page 237) and between 1872 and 1881 it became the First District Court. On September 14, 1881, the property was acquired from George C. Friedrichs by the Society of the Holy Family (Octave de Armas, NP, Notarial Archives, City of New Orleans).

Before presenting the chain of title on this property, further reference should be made to some of the documentary evidence regarding the fabric and furnishings. In a sale referred to here-after, there is listed and itemized an "enormous amount of decorations and accessories" (May 11, 1836, Act #333, F. de Armas, NP, Notarial Archives, City of New Orleans) (See Appendix F). The addition of the balcony and the existing parapet is not documented, but certain repairs were made according to an untranslated contract (27 October 1843, Act #252, Lucien Hermann, NP, Notarial Archives, City of New Orleans) (See Appendix G) and according to specifications annexed to an Act passed before E. Barnett, NP, April 20, 1867 (Notarial Archives, City of New Orleans) (See Appendix H) major structural repairs were made in accordance with plans by James Freret and Cramfrow, Architects. Alterations on the interior, to adapt the building to its present use have not been documented.

The source for the following chain of title is the Notarial Archives, City of New Orleans, as acquired from the Vieux Carré

Survey Board, The Edward G. Schleider Educational Foundation and appended hereto. Since various properties in this Square were acquired by the Society of the Holy Family at various times, reference should be made to the appended map traced from a map drawn by A. de Armas, July 10, 1869, as annexed to Act 112, July 15, 1873, by O. de Armas, Notary Public. (See Appendix I) The Orleans Ballroom and the first addition to it which extended through the Square to St. Ann Street are designated on the map as Lot "A". Only the chain on this portion will be traced.

The Society of the Holy Family acquired from George G. Friedrichs (September 14, 1881, Octave de Armas, NP.) (See Appendix J); George G. Friedrichs acquired from Camille E. Girardy at Sheriff's Sale from (September 8, 1881, U.S. District Court #8560) (See Appendix K); Camille E. Girardy acquired from J.H. O'Conner (October 1, 1873, P.C. Cuvellier, NP) (See Appendix K); John H. O'Conner acquired at Sheriff's Sale from Henry Parlange (June 20, 1873, Fifth District Court #21) (See Appendix K); Jean Henry Parlange acquired from the Succession of John McDonogh (City of Baltimore), (March 23, 1859, E.G. Gotschalk, NP) (See Appendix K); John McDonogh acquired from the Union Bank of Louisiana (October 23, 1849, A. Mazureau, NP) (See Appendices K and M); Union Bank of Louisiana acquired from Orleans Theatre Co. at Sheriff's Sale (September 29, 1843, Fifth District Court #765) (See Appendix K); Orleans Theatre Co. acquired from John Davis (May 11, 1836, F. de Armas, NP) (See Appendices K and F);

John Davis acquired a part interest from Jean Phillipon, (November 3, 1820, P. Pedesclaux, NP) (See Appendices L and N).

To determine the chain of title for the actual property on which the Orleans Ballroom stands, it is necessary at this point to trace Lot "A" in five separate portions, the applicable portions being Nos. 1, 2, and 3 in appendix L. John Davis and Jean Phillipon acquired Portion No. 3 measuring 50'- 4" front on Orleans Street, from Bernard Marigny (December 6, 1815, P. Pedesclaux, NP) (See Appendix O) who had previously acquired it from the creditors of Joseph Montegut (June 26, 1815, Marc Lafitte, NP) (See Appendix L); Portions No. 1 and No. 2 which measure 21'- 0" and 34'- 4" front on Orleans were acquired by John Davis and Jean Phillipon from Pierre Sauve (February 13, 1816, Marc Lafitte, NP) (See Appendix P); Sauve acquired these two portions from the syndics of the creditors of Mr. Joseph Montegut (September 15, 1815, Marc Lafitte, NP) (See Appendices L and Q). All of the above transactions, it will be noted, begin with acquisitions from the Succession of Joseph Montegut. This Succession is missing from the records and no further acquisition is obtainable.

Limited time for this report precludes a further search of documentary records. It is felt, however, that additional data, particularly early detailed descriptions of the interior, might be discovered in the French language newspapers of the day. There is also a recent featured story on the Ball Room published in the Times - Picayune, March 26, 1963, by feature writer Martha Samuels.

Part II. Architectural Information

Although obscured somewhat by a balcony and a wood louvered screen, the simple rectilinear lines of the Orleans Ballroom still reflect a classical simplicity and horizontality in contrast to the neighboring buildings on this block. Its historical associations have attached much sentimental value to the structure which is presently being threatened by being engulfed in a motel complex.

The original fabric has weathered well and it stands in a generally good condition, although maintenance in recent years seems to have been minimum.

The overall dimensions of the building are 114'- 7" x 56'- 4". The overall height from the sidewalk to the top of the cornice is 36'- 9 1/4".

The foundations are inaccessible. The four exterior walls are brick bearing. There is an intermediate brick bearing wall which is parallel to the street facade and which encloses the actual ballroom. It terminates in a parapet above the roof and at the present time there is only one chimney on the end wall on the "river"-side.

Openings on the ground floor consist of one monumental doorway in the center flanked by Doric pilasters supporting a simple architrave. It should be noted that an early illustration depicts an arched opening over this doorway (See Appendix E). The date of

the 6 - paneled double doors, which are 13' - 8 3/4" high, is not known. Leading to the side driveway from Room No. 4 is a wood paneled double door glazed above, and a similar double door in the same room which leads to the rear courtyard. There are also exterior wood louvered shutters at the door. The remaining exterior door leads from room No. 5 to the rear courtyard. It is wood paneled with a modern exterior screened door.

On each side of the main entrance on the front there are four arched openings which frame double-hung windows, having double-hinged solid wood shutters on the exterior. Below each of these windows there are decorative cast iron foundation ventilators, which are now partially covered by the existing sidewalk which has been raised.

On the second floor there is a double door in the center. These doors have two panels below and 3 small lights above. On the exterior there are wood louvered shutters, and there is a glazed fan light above. This doorway which leads to a wood balcony is also framed by double engaged Doric pilasters supporting an elaborate projecting entablature. The height from the balcony floor to the top of the fan is 12' - 3".

Flanking the door and in vertical alignment with the windows below are double-hung windows with louvered shutters. These windows are 12' - 2" high and are framed with a flat plastered surround and individual moulded cornices.

Across the entire second floor there is a wood balcony supported by cantilevered iron bars. The balcony is roofed in two separate portions on each side of the center frontespiece. At this point the unroofed balcony deck extends out over the sidewalk to the curbing and is supported by a triple-arched entrance portico executed in wood. The balcony and the portico are not original but later additions.

Behind the existing parapet which does not correspond in details to that shown in early views, there is a gabled slate roof which covers the main rooms across the front. It is framed by a simple truss composed of 1" x 8's, 2" x 8's and 2" x 10's, spanning approximately 32'-6". The rear portion of the building is covered by a tar and gravel roof. The framing members cannot be seen.

Other than the Doric pilasters framing the entrance, the only decorative elements on the facade are the plastered cornices which frame each story. The crowning cornice is deeper and more richly profiled.

There is a modern gutter across the balcony roofs and also above the projecting portico at the entrance.

On the interior, the arrangement of rooms is an obvious alteration from the original layout. On the first floor there is a wide central hall leading from the entrance to a spacious stair-lobby at the rear. The central hall has an asphalt tile floor, and the floor of the stair-lobby, is black and white marble tiles. There is a flight of two steps at the rear of the central hall leading up to the stair-lobby. The

The opening between the rooms has been reduced in width, so that two free-standing Doric columns now stand in front of the modern walls. It is not difficult to visualize the pleasing effect of the original appearance of the steps and the columns leading to the stair-hall. A modern elevator has been installed in the stair-lobby. There are two rooms with asphalt tile floors, one at each end of the stair-lobby. The space to the left of the entrance hall has been partitioned into two rooms, the first, opening to the hall and one riser up from it is the smaller room which is presently used as the school office. The floor is linoleum and there is a ceiling cornice on three walls. Connected by a doorway is the larger room with wood floor now used as a chemistry laboratory. There are also two rows of three each round wood columns in this room which would have been symmetrically disposed in the one large room before the office partition was added. The ceiling cornice is a continuation of the first room. On the right of the stair hall, but not connected to it is a large room with wooden floor presently used as a dining room. There are only two circular iron columns in this room. Entrance to the room is from the stair-lobby, and there is also a connecting doorway to the existing kitchen adjacent. There is an asphalt tile floor in the kitchen.

All of the walls downstairs have a smooth plaster finish, except for the kitchen which is of vertical wood boards. There is a wood wainscote in the entrance hall and the stair-lobby only. The interior

wall which divides all of the front rooms from those in the rear is brick-bearing. All ceilings downstairs are plastered except for the wood ceiling in the kitchen.

A spacious U-shaped wooden stair with two landings leads to the second floor stair-lobby. At each end of this lobby there are two rooms, a parlor and a sewing room. All of these rooms have wood floors. There are doors leading from the stair-hall to a later addition, the student dormitory, which extends to the rear. At the mid-point of the building there is a hall-way leading from the stair-lobby in the rear to the balcony on the front, the deck of the balcony is four risers up from the hall. There are four classrooms across the front of the building, two on each side of the hall. The floors in two of them are wood, and on the other side they are asphalt tile. Walls and ceilings are finished in smooth plaster.

In these classrooms, the plaster cornices exist on all of the plastered brick-bearing walls.

The only remaining decorative features in these front rooms are large cast-iron ceiling rosettes which are perforated to the attic space above.

The building is lighted by modern electrical fixtures and heated by gas space heaters. The only trace of original heat is what appears to be twin fireplaces, (on the same wall) at the "river" end of the original ballroom. The single existing chimney is a continuation of the one nearest to the street. An early view shows the second chimney

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(See Appendix A). There is a distinct contrast between the quietness of this block of Orleans Street and the noisier Royal and Bourbon Streets which are the perpendicular boundaries of this particular square. Being flush with the sidewalk there is no landscaping on the street front, the open spaces occurring in the courtyards in the rear. These courtyards are paved and contain a few flower beds and a small fountain. It is not treated however, in the usual lush manner of some of the restored patios.